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# *A Commentay on Avicenâ's al-Ishârât wa al-Tanbîhât*

by

**Fakhr al-Dîn al-Râzî**

**(544 - 606 AH)**

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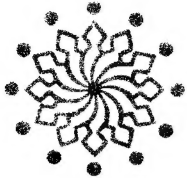
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Gottes ist der Orient!
Gottes ist der Okzident!
Nord - und südliches Gelände
Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände

The above verses from Goethe's celebrated *Divan*, which are in fact a free rendering of the Qur'anic Verse 2:115 (109) by the German poet, may well serve as a reminder of universal values at a time when, despite the phenomenon called "globalization," East and West and North and South threaten to drive further apart than ever. In such a situation it is of particular importance that the common heritage of Orient and Occident be brought to mind again. At the same time, the differentiating factors that have contributed since Antiquity to the shaping of an "Eastern" and a "Western" consciousness will have to be thought about in some depth, especially when a true dialogue of civilizations is called for.

Surely the most important elements of the common heritage of Orient and Occident are monotheism on one hand, and the philosophical tradition on the other, that is to say, the systematic way of doing philosophy that was inherited from the Greeks by Jews, Christians and Muslims, and creatively adapted by them to their respective needs. As

is well-known, the highlights of this reception process were two translation movements: the translations from Greek and Syriac into Arabic, done mainly by oriental Christians sponsored in the 8th and early 9th centuries by the ʿAbbāsid caliphs of Baghdād, and, some four centuries later, the translations from Arabic into Hebrew and Latin, which were facilitated by the then still relatively easy coexistence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in Spain, and were in their turn to influence the coming about of the European Renaissance.

What was not so well-known until quite recently is that philosophy received a new impulse at the time not only in the West, but also in the East, and eventually found its way there to a kind of Renaissance, too, namely, what has been called the "Shīʿite Renaissance" of Ṣafawid Iran. While the classics of "Arabic philosophy," as it used to be known, Al-Fārābī, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and, above all, Averroes (Ibn Rushd) of Cordoba, were certainly familiar names to students of philosophy in general, the same could not be said about Suhrawardī, Averroes' Eastern contemporary, let alone Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā, the pillars of the "school of Iṣfahān" in the first half of the 17th century. In fact, after some pioneering efforts by Max Horten and a few others who questioned the habitual way of presenting the history of philosophy in the first half of the past century, it



took the life-time *engagement* and scholarly work of that most unusual among "Western Orientalists," Henry Corbin, to change the degree of awareness in the West considerably. As a result, it is not an infrequent experience in Paris bookshops nowadays to be encouraged to "read Sohravardi as one reads Kant", for example.

In Iran, on the other hand, intellectuals have been calling for some time now for an increased awareness of the foundations of modern and even post-modern thought as developed in the West.

Of course the process of reception and creative adaptation referred to above has never been going on without raising serious questions and problems. To be sure, a significant attempt to bridge the gap between Athens and Jerusalem through philosophical interpretation of Scripture had already been made at the very beginning of the Christian era by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and polytheistic Neoplatonism of late Antiquity had already been transformed by oriental Christianity into a form acceptable to monotheists before the coming of Islam. But tensions and contradictions between revealed religion and human reason, or between their respective representatives in various settings, would of course subsist and manifest themselves in numerous ways. In the classical Islamic world, one issue debated from early on was the very modern

question of whether or not concepts could be "translated" at all, or adapted from one linguistic and cultural milieu to another. While Fārābī, the real founder of Islamic Peripateticism, strongly argued that logic as taught by the Greeks was universal logic, regardless of the language that happened to be used, the question was decided in the opposite sense in a famous debate held in Baghdād in 326/932. In another well-known debate, held a little earlier in Ray between the Ismāʿīlī theologian Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and the sceptic Platonist and physician Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (the Rhazes of the Latins), the issue at stake was rather one concerning the authority of traditions: while the Ismāʿīlī theologian challenged the authority of the philosophical tradition, the philosopher paid back in kind by daring to question the unity of the prophetic messages, and was eventually punished for such impertinence by being ranked among the arch-heretics. Perhaps for similar reasons, Fārābī himself (or possibly an unknown fellow philosopher writing under his name, as has recently been argued) felt compelled to prove, in the *Jamʿ bayn raʾyay al-ḥakīmayn,* that the doctrines of the great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, were not really contradictory if properly understood, although he had otherwise rather emphasized their difference.

Unlike most of Fārābī's work's, the *Jamʿ* contains



important references to the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, that is, the extracts from Plotinus' *Enneads* that had already been circulated under the name of Aristotle; and it is certainly not without significance for our purpose to note that this Neoplatonized Aristotle was to have a lasting influence in the Muslim East, including in particular Avicenna and the later school of Iṣfahān. If, for Mullā Ṣadrā, Aristotle was still the greatest of all philosophers whom he placed even above Avicenna, and indeed "among the perfect Friends of God" (*min al-awliyāʾ al-kāmilīn),* this was precisely because he regarded him, too, as the author of the *Theology*. In stark contrast to this, the *Great Commentator* of Aristotle in the Muslim West, Averroes, spent much of his philosophical and scholarly effort on purifying Aristotle precisely from that Neoplatonic admixture, for which he blamed mainly Avicenna.

One important reason for Averroes to be so critical of Avicenna was undoubtedly the serious blow the philosophical establishment in Islam had received at the hands of Ghazālī in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. This was not an ordinary refutation of philosophy on merely theological grounds, but an attempt to demonstrate that the established doctrines of the *falāsifa* were neither compatible with the main tenets of Islam as commonly understood, nor irrefutably certain and coherent in themselves. Nor did

Averroes in his answer to Ghazālī, the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut,* actually disagree with him on these points. He rather tried to save philosophy by arguing that Ghazālī had been a victim of Avicenna's misunderstandings of Aristotle in the first place, and that the study of the true demonstrative method was not only permissible, but in fact a legal obligation incumbent upon those qualified to interpret Scripture rationally. He evidently did not believe that the wisdom (*ḥikma*) of philosophy could possibly contradict the wisdom of religion, although his clear distinction between the demonstrative method and other, less perfect methods suitable for the masses, may well have something to do with the famous doctrine of the "double truth" that went under his name in the Latin Middle Ages.

More research will be needed to show whether Averroes also had any significant influence on further philosophical developments in the Muslim East, where he was, in any case, not unknown, just as, conversely, the *ishrāqī* philosophy of Suhrawardī was by no means unknown in 14th century Granada. Quite generally speaking, one should never underestimate the mobility of scholars and ideas in the Muslim world, given the religious duty of "migrating" in "search of knowledge" (*talab al-ʿilm*) and the social importance of commerce. It remains however true that the messages of Averroes and Ibn Ṭufayl were not really heard



in the Arab world until very recently, and that the credit for a continued existence of philosophy in the East must go primarily to Suhrawardī, who followed quite a different path.

Although Suhrawardī remained in many respects an Avicennian *malgré lui*, his project was to overcome the Peripatetic tradition, not by going back to the "true" Aristotle like Averroes, but by bringing new life to the "eternal wisdom" of Plato and the ancient Sages of the *Orient*, which is clearly one of the symbolic meanings given to the term *ishrāq* by Suhrawardī himself. As for the direct meaning of the term, "illumination," it refers, of course, to his doctrine of "light": an ontology based on the dynamic power of "light" rather than the abstract concept of "existence," and a corresponding epistemology or gnoseology by which he sought to replace the Peripatetic method of abstract knowledge through a direct "knowledge by presence" (*ʿilm huduri*). But Suhrawardī was not only a theorectical thinker. His ishrāq was *événement de l'âme*, as Henry Corbin puts it; and it was at least by implication highly political as well since he spoke quite openly and provocatively about the oppressive times in which the "powers of darkness" have taken over, in contrast to the "luminous" times of a distant mythical past governed by pious *Iranian* kings, and pointed to the necessity for the *true*

"representative of God" *(khalīfat Allāh)* on earth to be directly inspired by God. It is not very difficult to see, then, what might have led to his execution in 587/1191 in Ayyūbid Aleppo, at the age of 36 solar years. All the more remarkable is the fact that the *ishrāqī* "leaven" kneaded into Avicennism by the young Shaykh continued to be active in further developments in the Muslim East, and it has to be added that this East was now, i.e., after great changes occurring in the Muslim world in connection with the Mongol invasions, beginning to assume a more distinctly Iranian identity of its own. Other great names should certainly be mentioned in this context, too, such as Khwāja Naṣīruddīn-i Ṭūsī, whose defense of Avicenna and new interpretation of Shīʿism may to a certain extent have been influenced by Suhrawardī's *ishrāq*. Moreover, there is a spiritual dimension not to be overlooked in the process: the emigration of the great Spanish-Arab mystic Ibn 'Arabī to the Orient, and the reception of his thought by Shīʿī thinkers such as Ṭūsī's contemporary, ʿAlī b. Sulaymān al-Baḥrānī, and later on Sayyid Ḥaydar-i Āmulī or Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī. Of course this is not to deny the impact of Ibn ʿArabī on Sunnī Sufism, nor is it to imply that Iranian Shīʿism did not have its own strict opponents of anything remotely philosophical. It remains nevertheless a significant fact that the spiritual catalysts of both Suhrawardī and Ibn



ʿArabī were allowed to have their effect when Iran had definitely turned Shīʿī, and this in the very capital of the new nation, Iṣfahān.

The names of Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā will be frequently heard during this Colloquium side by side with those of Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufayl and Averroes. It is hoped that this unusual, simultaneous approach to two quite different "schools" of Islamic philosophy will cast some new light on what this philosophy is all about.

**Hermann Landolt**